



***Compass Interdisciplinary
Virtual Conference
-19-30 Oct 2009-***

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COMMENTARY ON:

**Waste Studies - A New Paradigm for Literary Analysis
Something is Rotten in the Denmark of *Beowulf* and *Hamlet***

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In her “wasteful” reading of *Beowulf* and *Hamlet*, Morrison sounds a call to arms to embrace waste by recognizing that in so doing we embrace our own unloveliness and go some way toward closing the gap between the polarized self and the other. Just as we might think of Freud as a cosmologist who refashioned the human being as *animal irrationale*, so might we think of the waste paradigm refashioning the human being as *animal foedissimum*, filthy creatures who may yet find hope in ceasing to deny their own dirt and learning tolerance for the dirt of others. As a cosmology, waste resonates, somewhat ironically, with the good news of early Pauline Christianity, which transcended exclusionary Judaic rituals of purification to include in its scheme of redemption the slave, the menstruating woman, and the uncircumcised. No body goes to waste. The gospel of waste might equally be figured as a philosophical turn. Where Plato wanted to cleanse his republic of base fictions, Aristotle found a use for all kinds of knowledge, even the discarded rhetoric and poetry.

As a cosmology, Waste Studies can paint with broad strokes of the brush and subsume meanings of rubbish that do not unify coherently. At various junctures in Morrison's essay waste seemed to denote: reusable leftovers; unusable byproduct; unpleasant reminders; the repressed other; anything hoarded; repetitions, redundancies, digressions, and puns found throughout discourse and narrative. In short, any kind of residue, trace, or surplus. Can waste encompass all these meanings and still be meaningful?

Sometimes, yes. It is not unprofitable to imagine awhile everything in the world as waste, actual or potential. Yet it is equally not unprofitable to opt for a narrower application of the term. In its earliest usage in English, “waste” denoted variously, often referring to the squandering or misuse of a proper resource (the definition of propriety admittedly being the big question). It also referred to empty spaces such as wilderness and fens—places that served no immediate purpose, that could house dangerous presences such as Grendel’s mother, yet that had their place in the order of things. The word “waste,” understood as industrial or inorganic byproduct, predominates in the nineteenth century, suggesting that the politics of waste have most to do with the environmental and global cost of advanced industrial capitalism (that mode of production devoted to the business of accumulation and stock-piling). This is not to say that earlier modes of production did not generate toxic residue or deplete natural resources, but the waste generated by industrial capitalism is exponentially, systemically greater. In fashioning waste as a cosmology let us consider, as Thomas Kuhn argued so memorably, that cosmologies have their histories.

In relation to historicizing waste, I see the real relevance of Thomas Kuhn’s model of paradigm shifts or scientific revolutions, about which I should like to have read either more or less in this essay. What Morrison calls waste Kuhn calls anomalies in “normal” science that gradually accumulate beyond the point of comfort, inducing a crisis of confidence, overturning the old paradigm and replacing it with a new paradigm. In so characterizing the history of science as a series of fitful *bouleversements*, Kuhn denied the notion of science as a linear progress toward truth. What is anomalous in one scientific paradigm provides the material for the normative claims of the next scientific paradigm. What then is the history of waste—a constant battle with the unusable or a shifting index of our sense of value?

Morrison claims that Waste Studies make us understand our lives differently. I want to ask whether and how Waste Studies make us read or write differently? For those of us in the academic business, it is hard to avoid the analogy between our published words and useless byproduct. Should we publish less product? Should we offer something more useful to a wider audience? Should we write more ironically, ever mindful that we are always in some sense writing rubbish?